

Gadamer and the Universality of Hermeneutical Reflection

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Abstract

In this paper I defend Gadamer's claim that the scope of hermeneutical reflection is universal. I consider Habermas's critique of Gadamer—in particular, his objection that language and tradition are ideological. I argue that Gadamer's elaboration of the historical ground of hermeneutic experience supports the key implication of his understanding of the relationship between thinking and being, which is that the conditions for reflection upon our preconceptions of meaning are themselves mediated through language as effective history. In response to Habermas's criticisms, hermeneutical reflection is therefore able to emancipate the interpreter from ideological forms of consciousness by understanding them as effective history.

Gadamer has been criticized for his lack of reflection on the conditions that make it possible to distinguish between true and false preconceptions of meaning. Critics have claimed, on the one hand, that the priority he lends to tradition puts too much constraint on the scope of interpretation, and, on the other, that prioritizing the essential openness and productivity of interpretation threatens to relativize truth. Attempts to mediate this dilemma tend to focus on the dialogical structure of hermeneutics.¹ A dialogue has a minimal

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¹ E.g., Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 155; Steven Cauchon, "Openness to Critical Reflection: Ghandi

justificatory demand that implies some form of critical reflection. In this respect, Jürgen Habermas becomes a valuable critic of Gadamer's hermeneutics. In his view, Gadamer correctly emphasizes the inherently reflective dimension of thought and language, which produces an agreement, but overlooks the fact that language and tradition can preserve forms of ideology that distort understanding. Habermas concludes that the critical apparatus that hermeneutics requires cannot itself be conditioned by language or tradition. In this essay, we will consider some of Habermas's and Gadamer's arguments for and against the universality of language and tradition. Ultimately this paper favours Gadamer's approach, which finds that the conditions for truth are apprehended through our consciousness of language as effective history.

Basic to Gadamer's idea of hermeneutic experience is the fact that we are constantly confronted with other possibilities of meaning, whose validity, as determined in a dialogue, contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of things. An essential factor in hermeneutic experience is thus the pre-interpretive stance that one inherits from tradition. This is what Gadamer calls a "prejudice," whose positive meaning he rescues from the Enlightenment's so-called "prejudice against prejudice."² All hermeneutical understanding involves a preconception of meaning as a necessary first step toward gaining substantial knowledge of the subject at hand. Hermeneutic experience is also essentially an open and unending process. Gadamer is describing the conditions under which understanding is possible and productive, and so the question of the completion of knowledge does not apply. Yet this is not to say that the object of understanding, the "things themselves" (*die Sache*), are themselves incomplete. It is just that our understanding of these things is never complete and is constantly developing. Thus, while understanding always anticipates

beyond Gadamer," in *Inheriting Gadamer: New Directions in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Georgia Warnke (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 102-120, here p. 102.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (London : Continuum Publishing Group, 2006), p. 274-285.

the completeness of its object,³ insight into the totality of things can only ever be partial.

The back-and-forth movement between prejudice and interpretation is captured in the image of the hermeneutical circle. Gadamer appropriates Heidegger's description of the hermeneutical circle as part of the ontological structure of understanding.⁴ On this view, drawing out the implications of the fore-conception of meaning alters not only our preconception of meaning but also the content of the tradition that supplies this fore-conception in the first place. "Tradition," Gadamer writes, "is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves."⁵ This is not just a logical or epistemological claim. Referring again to Heidegger's demonstration of the productivity of the hermeneutical circle, Gadamer writes, "It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being."⁶ Understanding is self-understanding, and so our constant involvement in the search for knowledge is an ongoing search for self-knowledge.⁷

Both Gadamer and Habermas are critical of the "naïve objectivism" of a positivistic approach to truth and the articulation of meaning.⁸ For his part, Habermas finds that positivism does not

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Continuum Publishing Group, 2006), p. 294.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 293-294.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Ling (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 9.

⁷ Earlier approaches to hermeneutics presuppose that the object under investigation can be understood as a complete whole by knowing the correlation between all of its parts. Gadamer explains that in the 19th century, "the circular movement of understanding runs backward and forward along the text, and ceases when the text is perfectly understood" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 293). Thus Schleiermacher, for example, developed hermeneutics as a methodological tool to assist other fields attain their ideal of epistemological certainty.

⁸ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 27; sc. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987),

properly attend to the essential, practical dimension of language that presents a “lifeworld.” He criticizes Wittgenstein, for example, for remaining too restrictive in his approach to language games and failing to appreciate that “the application of rules [in a language game] includes their interpretation and further development.”⁹ In his view, however, Gadamer has gone too far in the opposite direction by creating an “abstract opposition between hermeneutic experience and methodical knowledge as a whole.”¹⁰ Habermas thinks that the “confrontation” between truth and method establishes the basis of the hermeneutical sciences such that it is a mistake to try to separate the hermeneutic phenomenon from “the business of methodology.”¹¹ As we will see, Habermas does not appeal to Kantian, a priori categories of truth. Rather, he proposes that our practical involvement in a social community allows us to interpret empirically the transcendental structure of our “lifeworld,” within which a consensus is possible that is free from coercion and force.¹²

There are two principle conditions that a hermeneutical dialogue must satisfy in order to successfully obtain a genuine understanding between the interlocutors. First, they must agree on the subject matter that they have in common and whose nature they wish to uncover. Second, they must be open to the possibility that what the other says about this subject matter is true, even if this entails a contradiction. Central to Gadamer’s hermeneutical theory is that this second condition, especially, forces the interlocutors to bring into question the hidden prejudices or biases that form the basis of their claims. Arguably, however, Gadamer leaves open the possibility that

p. 108 ; and Richard Bernstein, “The Constellation of Hermeneutics, Critical Theory and Deconstruction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 267-282, here p. 268.

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A. Stark (Cambridge, Mass. : The MIT Press, 1988), p. 148.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹² Demetrius Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding : A Study of the Habermas-Gadamer Debate* (London and Toronto : Associated University Presses, 1995), p. 100.

under certain circumstances an understanding can be reached that does not require this moment of critical reflection. He describes classical texts, for example, as having a timeless quality that resists historical criticism.¹³ In Habermas's view, tradition itself has become this kind of authority in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Thus, while he agrees with Gadamer that understanding is a matter of consensus,¹⁴ he argues that Gadamer overlooks the possibility that this consensus may be "systematically distorted" due to a lack of critical reflection upon its ideological basis.¹⁵

Habermas reasonably illustrates that there are conditions for the truth of judgments that extend beyond the scope of hermeneutical reflection. Habermas argues therefore that the hermeneutical event of truth must be situated within a larger framework that can reveal when this event is the product of distortion. What hermeneutics requires in his view is "a system of reference that transcends the context of tradition as such."¹⁶ As the medium of tradition, language is also a medium of domination and force, and therefore is itself ideological and deceptive.¹⁷ Thus the framework that Habermas wants to develop must transcend the medium of language as well.

Gadamer, by contrast, elevates tradition to the level of a transcendental subject, the apprehension of which belongs to the historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*). He strongly insists against Habermas that hermeneutical reflection is therefore a universal phenomenon. Elaborating on his claim that "being that can be understood is language,"¹⁸ he says that this should not be understood as a metaphysical assertion but rather as a description of the "unrestricted scope possessed by the hermeneutical perspective."¹⁹ This amounts to saying that language, as the medium of the universal, hermeneutical phenomenon, also mediates the conditions that discriminate between valid and invalid judgments. Defending Gadamer's claim concerning the universality of

¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 288.

¹⁴ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 164.

¹⁵ Sc. Warnke, *Hermeneutics*, p. 111.

¹⁶ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 170.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 470.

¹⁹ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 103.

hermeneutical experience will therefore support the universality of language as the medium of this experience and the conditions for truth.

Habermas and the Critique of Ideology

Like Gadamer, Habermas is concerned with the conditions under which coming to a shared understanding becomes possible. Developing a theory of activity within a social framework, he views the problem of understanding in the context of human action interpreted within historical and social processes.²⁰ Habermas makes a similar distinction as Gadamer between the natural and social sciences, which he terms *empirical-analytic* and *historical-hermeneutic* respectively. The articulation of meaning within the social sciences thus entails a double hermeneutic : coming to a shared understanding requires a sensitivity to both the normative framework that establishes a set of shared social values, practices, and beliefs, as well as the contingent circumstances of actions within this framework that illustrate their intentionality. The positivist framework of empirical-analytic science would thus entail “detaching theory from the hermeneutic situation in which it is formulated and separating actions, norms of actions and the like from the language games that give them their sense.”²¹ Coming to a shared understanding within the social sciences is thus a matter of knowing both the theoretical framework that dictates how forms of communication are constructed and the practical sense in which language is actually used to express meaning or intention.

Habermas is critical of the attempt to ground the social sciences within a theory of linguistic analysis. In his view, this approach incorrectly assumes the possibility of a “pure theory” – that is, a metalanguage with which it is possible to give a formal, external description of a culture and its social processes.²² If such a description were possible, the linguistic analyst would be able to adopt an alternative form of life freely – that is, without needing a point of reference in the form of life he or she has left behind.

²⁰ Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding*, p. 17.

²¹ Warnke, *Hermeneutics*, p. 109.

²² Habermas, *Logic*, p. 136.

Habermas insists, however, that learning a language, is both a theoretical and practical exercise.²³ In other words, the point that linguistic analysis misses in wanting to ground the social sciences in pure theory is that learning a new language is not just a matter of Wittgensteinian “resocialization” but rather a matter of learning “the new language of value and practice from the ground up, as it were, by virtual participation, as a member, in the activities of a given group.”²⁴ Habermas claims that learning a new language or form of life is rather an issue of mediating between “different patterns of socialization,” and therefore that coming to a shared understanding is possible only insofar as an alternative form of life can be made meaningful within one’s own language.²⁵

Habermas elaborates the possibility of achieving this consensus through Gadamer’s approach to translation. According to Gadamer, translation is possible only if a common subject matter exists between the translator and whatever he or she is translating. Since learning a language requires actually living in it,²⁶ translation is therefore a matter of coming to a shared understanding about this subject matter as opposed to mastering the other language.²⁷ Similarly, Habermas rejects the positivist concept of an ideal metalanguage that provides a set of general rules within which the plurality of linguistic frameworks operates.²⁸ As above, one does not learn another language simply by substituting one set of symbols for another. Instead, one mediates the differences between languages by translating one into the other.²⁹ Thus the translator does not transpose himself or herself into another form of life, just as the interpreter does not transpose himself or herself into the mind of the author in order to understand a text. The translator, Gadamer writes, “must preserve the character of his own language, the language into which he is translating, while still

²³ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 135.

²⁴ Warnke, *Hermeneutics*, p. 110.

²⁵ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 137, p. 146.

²⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 386.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

²⁸ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 132, p. 148.

²⁹ Sc. Warnke, *Hermeneutics*, p. 11.

recognizing the value of the alien, even antagonistic character of the text and its expression.”³⁰

For Habermas, one of the more salient features of Gadamer’s hermeneutics is therefore its “tendency to self-transcendence that is inherent in the practice of language.”³¹ A shared understanding is achieved through a fusion of horizons.³² The framework of each individual language and its corresponding worldview thus contains within itself the possibility of stepping outside it. It is for this reason, Habermas says, that we are never restricted to a single grammatical framework. Rather, “the first grammar that one masters also enables one to step outside of it and interpret something foreign, to make something that is incomprehensible intelligible, to put in one’s own words what at first eludes one.”³³ Translation is therefore a productive activity, in that the assimilation of foreign meanings develops the scope of one’s own language and understanding. In this way hermeneutics clarifies for Habermas the conditions under which the social sciences obtain knowledge as a form of communication and consensus.³⁴

It is by virtue of its character of self-transcendence that Habermas claims that hermeneutics, in contrast to the methodology of the empirical-analytic sciences, can serve as the basis for the cultural sciences. According to his description of the logic of the hermeneutical circle, the anticipation of completeness in fore-knowledge has no “rigorous” content. Rather, the interpretive schema that fore-knowledge presupposes works as a hypothesis to be tested scientifically in its application within social and practical contexts. In this way hermeneutics reveals in ordinary language “the *empirical* content of individuated conditions of life while investigating *grammatical* structures.”³⁵ These grammatical structures provide a normative framework for the cultural sciences, the apprehension of which develops internally through the operation of social processes.

³⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 388-389.

³¹ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 144.

³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 390.

³³ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 143.

³⁴ Warnke, *Hermeneutics*, p. 111.

³⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London : Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1972), p. 173 ; emphasis his.

Thus, the transcendental framework of a form of life is approached and understood empirically through the interpretation of its own language and language games.³⁶

Despite the contribution that hermeneutics makes to the social sciences, Habermas argues that Gadamer overlooks the possibility that a consensus will be “systematically distorted” through ideology. The problem Habermas identifies is not that understanding can be influenced by a prejudice or bias, but rather that hermeneutics lacks an appropriate apparatus to critically reflect upon tradition as the cause of this prejudice. As Alan How explains, the salient feature of Gadamer’s account of language is that he views language as both “inwardly and outwardly porous.”³⁷ It is outwardly porous by virtue of its ability to translate and appropriate foreign meanings, and inwardly porous by virtue of its ability to evaluate its own internal, normative structure. For Gadamer, a conversation between two people who speak the same language involves minimally an exchange of different points of view, and so even here, where there is hardly any interruption in meaning, the hermeneutical task of coming to a shared understanding is still at work.³⁸ According to Habermas, however, Gadamer lends too much authority to tradition, to the point of identifying it as an absolute. Consequently, hermeneutic reflection loses its power of self-transcendence and thereby its ability to reflect upon its own internal, normative structures.³⁹ Without this critical apparatus, hermeneutics remains unable to confront those prejudices which distort meaning according to some historical ideology from those which have a more dynamic function.

Habermas thus moves the conditions for understanding and communication beyond the scope of hermeneutics to include a critical apparatus that can locate and reveal the cause of distortions. He finds that Freudian psychoanalysis provides the solution to the problems surrounding the possibility of distorted communication.

³⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London : Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1972), p. 194 ; sc. Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding*, p. 100.

³⁷ Alan How, *The Habermas-Gadamer Debate and the Nature of the Social* (Aldershot : Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1995), p. 123-125.

³⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 388-389.

³⁹ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 172.

Demetrius Teigas summarizes Habermas's approach to a psychoanalytic, controlled interpretation as follows :

The analyst uses theoretical hypotheses, assumptions, and presuppositions which, while they can provide explanatory potential, they can, on the other hand, be thought of as parts of the overall cycle of a hermeneutical interpretation. Instead of moving between the parts and the whole, as in the hermeneutical circle, the whole here is understood in accordance with a fixed theory ; it is presunderstood in specific guidelines which the psychoanalytic theory in use dictates. Also, the way in which the parts belong to the whole is also supplied by the theory. The symptomatic expressions are relayed to specific structures that generate them. The distortions can be traced upon explicit confusions between the prelinguistic and linguistic organization of symbols (as the theory informs us).⁴⁰

Whereas hermeneutics proceeds from preconceptions that are formed within tradition and elaborates the logic of the hermeneutical circle as a reciprocal process between the whole and its parts, the process of a controlled interpretation locates a causal relation between whole and part according to generalized patterns.⁴¹ The psychoanalytic approach to a "controlled interpretation" provides the cultural sciences with the methodology they require by establishing a theoretical framework for evaluating normative behavioral patterns. With respect to language, psychoanalysis thereby corrects deformities in a language game that has become privatized. The therapist traces these "desymbolized" meanings to their original symbolic form, allowing the patient to translate them back into public language.⁴² With respect to social relations, the patient becomes aware of the otherwise unconscious motivations for his or her actions according to which he deviates from accepted social paradigms.

Using psychoanalysis as a model for this reflective activity, the social sciences can thereby incorporate dimensions of human action

⁴⁰ Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding*, p. 152-153.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴² Warnke, *Hermeneutics*, p. 125.

and interest that extend beyond the scope of tradition. This approach develops what Habermas calls an “ideal speech situation” – that is, a model of communication free from prejudice and distortive ideology.⁴³ He claims that language mediates domination and power in addition to tradition, thereby necessitating the transition from hermeneutical reflection to a critique of ideology.⁴⁴ The notion of an ideal speech situation in effect tries to uphold the Enlightenment project of rational, unbiased inquiry against Gadamer’s criticism of this approach. It provides a space within which claims can be evaluated with certainty of their meaning by organizing these claims according to a universalized capacity to articulate meaning, rather than leaving this capacity relative to particular groups within a society.⁴⁵

Lorenzo Simpson’s description of transcendental ethnocentrism illustrates the impact that Habermas’s project has for Gadamer’s hermeneutics.⁴⁶ According to Simpson, what a theory of transcendental ethnocentrism requires is a transcultural framework that does not presuppose transcendental categories of truth and meaning, but one that allows an outside observer to interpret the meaning of cultural practices without having to adopt their

⁴³ Jürgen Habermas, “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality,” in *Contemporary Hermeneutics : Method, Philosophy and Critique*, ed. Josef Bleicher (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 181-121, here p. 206.

⁴⁴ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 172.

⁴⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge : The MIT Press, 1998), p. 34-35.

⁴⁶ Habermas suggests correctly that the conditions for coming to a shared understanding must apply across geographical or cultural distances as well as temporal distances (Habermas, *Logic*, p. 148, p. 151). Gadamer modifies his claim in *Truth and Method* that “only temporal distance can solve the question of critique in hermeneutics” to read that “often” temporal distance can accomplish this (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 376, n. 44). While this change likely indicates Gadamer’s awareness of the fact that tradition can sometimes perpetuate a distorted interpretation (Jean Grondin, “Hermeneutics and Relativism,” in *Festivals of Interpretation : Essays on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Work*, ed. Kathleen Wright (Albany : SUNY Press, 1990), p. 42-62, here p. 56), it suggests perhaps as well his recognition that the space between familiarity and strangeness can occur contemporaneously between different cultural groups.

ideological background. He proposes that each culture can maintain its own internal standards of reasonable social interaction without precluding the possibility that these standards can change in light of an external claim that they themselves would find reasonable. He argues, then, that there is a transcendental demand to approach other cultures as being like our own, in that their members also operate within and according to their own cultural ideal. In this sense, the grounds for critiquing social practices are “*internal* to the cultural horizons that sustain those practices, grounds that make it unnecessary that critique appeal to anything beyond the standards of rationality and/or central vocabulary of a particular cultural group.”⁴⁷ References to transcendental categories of meaning are therefore unnecessary in order to offer an internal critique of a cultural identity.

Similarly, Habermas claims that by recognizing that one’s own cultural ideal is not absolute one can evaluate its internal standards from an external perspective. As Simpson explains, different cultures, “if challenged in ways that are understandable to them, [can] be held accountable to *reasons* that have a non-parochial purchase and that are binding for them.”⁴⁸ Such a claim makes no appeal to transcendental categories, but rather appeals to normative standards within each cultural form according to what Simpson calls standards of “second-order rationality.” This is a general form of reasoning that everyone possesses by virtue of being a rational agent. Appealing to second-order rationality thereby makes it possible, Simpson suggests, to “intelligibly mark a distinction between what even everyone in a particular epistemic community *happens* to believe and what is, by their *own* lights, *reasonable* for them to believe.”⁴⁹ A cross-cultural commitment to the standards of second-order rationality therefore implies that members of a cultural community must assent to the greater force of reason beyond the scope of their own cultural tradition where this reason is presented.

⁴⁷ Lorenzo Simpson, “Critical Fusions : Towards a Genuine ‘Hermeneutics of Suspicion,’” in *Inheriting Gadamer: New Directions in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Georgia Warnke (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 21-40, here p. 27 ; emphasis his.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28 ; emphasis his.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* ; emphasis his.

Habermas argues therefore that, by experiencing the limits of a cultural tradition from within, one is able to recognize that tradition is not absolute, but is in fact one of many factors that jointly contribute to the development of social relations. What is required is therefore a framework within which tradition becomes comprehensible in relation to the extra-traditional factors that constitute social processes, “so that we can indicate the conditions external to tradition under which transcendental rules of worldview and action change empirically.”⁵⁰ In his view, Gadamer does not notice that the “linguistic structures” of tradition and the “empirical conditions under which [these structures] change historically” are not themselves mediated by tradition. Rather, the extra-traditional factors manifest these things in and through tradition, operating “behind the back of language” and so affecting “the very grammatical rules in accordance with which we interpret the world.”⁵¹ For this reason Habermas argues that language, as the medium of tradition, is also a medium of domination and social power or labour, which he claims cannot be reduced to the kinds of normative relationships manifested in tradition.

According to Habermas, attempts to develop a hermeneutical foundation of the cultural sciences have passed over the dialectical relationship between universal and particular on which the empirical-analytic sciences are founded. As a result, the cultural sciences cannot properly account for the relation between objectivation and experience that this dialectic determines.⁵² He claims that unless the cultural sciences are able to mediate between objectivated modes of

⁵⁰ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 174.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² As Teigas explains, to “objectivate” something for Habermas “is to give it a form in a symbolic system (e.g. within language) so that it can be communicated and understood” (Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding*, p. 193, n. 40). Partners in a dialogue must therefore objectivate the “inner form” of their experience so that it can be understood by the other in an outward or explicit expression. Thus “every objectivation is part of an intersubjectively valid symbolic structure,” which means that “understanding itself is bound to a situation in which at least two subjects communicate in a language that allows them to share, that is to make communicable through intersubjectively valid symbols, what is absolutely unsharable and individual” (Habermas, *Knowledge*, p. 179).

expression, they will remain unable to discriminate between valid and invalid or “distorted” forms of communication. As Teigas explain, part of Habermas’s task is thus to see “whether there is a *different way of understanding meaning* methodologically, especially the meaning of distorted communication, which can avoid and ‘transcend’ the hermeneutic understanding.”⁵³ The proper, normative framework of the cultural sciences thus requires a marriage between, on the one hand, the kind of methodology that an empirical-analytic procedure employs in order to obtain certainty and, on the other, the power of reflection and self-transcendence inherent in hermeneutics and ordinary language.⁵⁴

The Hermeneutical Claim to Universality

Gadamer does not consider the authority of tradition to be absolute. He explains that the acceptance of an authority figure is always based in reason and not a “subjection and abdication” of reason.⁵⁵ Anyone who has been to a doctor’s office, for example, can understand the difference between an uncritical acceptance of authority and an irrational one. A patient can have trust in a doctor’s expertise more or less uncritically – e.g., without wanting a second opinion – but this does not mean that the patient has no reason to trust the doctor. Similarly, in Gadamer’s view the timeless quality of a classical text is reason enough to give it credence.⁵⁶ He therefore rejects Habermas’s proposed antithesis between tradition and reason,⁵⁷ for there are always reasons to accept an authority even if this happens uncritically. The uncritical acceptance of authority is in fact an outlying case, and in Gadamer’s view it should not be made to imply that certain authority figures are beyond critical examination. Indeed, Gadamer maintains that hermeneutical reflection is not just capable of bringing into question the prejudices of tradition. In response to Habermas’s criticisms, he insists that hermeneutical reflection is a universal characteristic of human understanding.

⁵³ Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding*, p. 147 ; emphasis his.

⁵⁴ Sc. How, *Habermas-Gadamer*, p. 117.

⁵⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 281.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁵⁷ Sc. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 28, p. 33.

Like Habermas, Gadamer wants to avoid the inherent dogmatism in the scientific objectification of reality. Following Humboldt, he argues that each form of language constructs a “worldview,” and, reciprocally, that the essence of language is the world it presents.⁵⁸ Gadamer rejects, however, a “world in itself” (*Welt an sich*) that contains the criteria for the development of world and language.⁵⁹ Rather, each worldview is a part contained within a whole, which does not exist *an sich* beyond these parts but is rather constituted by them :

In every worldview the existence of the world-in-itself is intended. It is the whole to which linguistically schematized experience refers. The multiplicity of these worldviews does not involve any relativization of the “world.” Rather, the world is not different from the views in which it presents itself.⁶⁰

Similar to Habermas in his approach to forms of life and Simpson in his approach to cultural ideals, Gadamer’s approach identifies the mediation between different forms of language or worldviews as an act of translation or transposition that does not require a priori categories of truth. Each worldview can be extended into others, and so contains within itself the conditions for understanding the worldview presented in another language.⁶¹

Habermas, as we saw, appeals to a transcendental schema that encompasses tradition and which can be approached through an empirical analysis of language.⁶² He argues that promoting language as a universal medium of understanding causes Gadamer to overlook the fact that language must also mediate elements of force and domination, which only propagate deceptions within language.⁶³ Thus, for Habermas, the linguistic presentation of a worldview requires a comprehension of language as something that is, on the

⁵⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 440.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 444.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

⁶² Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding*, p. 100.

⁶³ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 172-173 ; How, *Habermas-Gadamer*, p. 145.

one hand, internal to a cultural tradition, and on the other, situated within a larger reference system “so that we can indicate the conditions external to tradition under which transcendental rules of worldview and action change empirically.”⁶⁴

In contrast to Habermas’s empirical analysis of the grammatical structure of the lifeworld, Gadamer prioritizes the ontological question of the meaning of being as it is available for presentation in language. To illustrate the difference between an empirical approach and an ontological approach to this question, Gadamer distinguishes between aesthetic and historical consciousness, on the one hand, and hermeneutical consciousness, on the other. The former modes of consciousness, Gadamer explains, attempt to objectify things scientifically in order to control or manipulate them. In doing so, the aesthetic or historical critic becomes alienated from the ontological question of the things themselves, leaving them unable to access this primary claim to truth.⁶⁵

Gadamer explains that attempts to mitigate this problem by developing a “science of hermeneutics” result in the same alienating experience that occurs in aesthetic and historical consciousness. The goal of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutical project, he explains, was to develop a method of avoiding misunderstanding. To exclude “by controlled, methodical consideration whatever is alien and leads to misunderstanding” is not, Gadamer says, an unfair description of the hermeneutical task. Nonetheless, this formulation belies a more fundamental experience. The possibility of coming to a shared understanding, of bridging the gap between familiarity and strangeness, already presupposes a consensus : “I may say ‘thou’ and I may refer to myself over against a thou, but a common understanding [*Verständigung*] always precedes these situations.”⁶⁶ Thus, while avoiding misunderstanding through a controllable method is certainly relevant to hermeneutical interests, “it is only a partial description of a comprehensive life-phenomenon that constitutes the ‘we’ that we all are.”⁶⁷ Gadamer claims that the hermeneutical task is therefore to overcome the alienating experience of aesthetic and historical

⁶⁴ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 174.

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

consciousness and scientific hermeneutics. There is a mode of being of the things themselves that is common to these modes of experience, he suggests, that precedes any scientific judgment.

The experience of the things themselves in hermeneutics is a negative experience. To explain what this means, Gadamer borrows the concept of a “determinate negation” from Hegel.⁶⁸ The space between familiarity and strangeness is where the interpreter encounters a different form of language to reflect an otherwise familiar concept. In other words, he encounters a different possibility of what this concept means for someone. Hegelian dialectic is significant for Gadamer because it gives experience the structure of a “reversal of consciousness” according to which consciousness has an experience of itself. Gadamer quotes Hegel’s explanation of this kind of experience :

The principle of experience contains the infinitely important element that in order to accept a content as true, the man himself must be present or, more precisely, he must find such content in unity and combined with the certainty of himself.⁶⁹

The concept of experience, Gadamer continues, means just that this unity with oneself is established in the reversal of consciousness : consciousness “recognizes itself in what is alien and different.”⁷⁰ Hegelian dialectical experience is therefore productive with respect to the meaning of being, as the “new object [of consciousness] contains the truth about the old one.”⁷¹ The interpreter obtains a more comprehensive knowledge of the matter at hand by understanding for himself what this subject matter can mean for someone else.

Gadamer indicates, however, that the relevance of Hegelian dialectic to philosophical hermeneutics does not extend any further. He writes that for Hegel, dialectic “must end in that overcoming of

⁶⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 348.

⁶⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis : Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), §7 ; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 348.

⁷⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 349.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

all experience which is attained in absolute knowledge – i.e., in the complete identity of consciousness and object.”⁷² While hermeneutics grants the validity of the phenomenological presupposition of the prior unity between subject and object, and furthermore has a certain implicit teleology insofar as it culminates in “being experienced,”⁷³ it always keeps the absolute unity between thinking and being at a distance. Our existence is fundamentally historical, and so understanding, both of ourselves and of *die Sache*, cannot be complete, as this knowledge is always being developed.⁷⁴ Gadamer wants not to overcome the tension between familiarity and strangeness but rather to clarify the conditions under which it remains productive for understanding.⁷⁵ With respect to our historical identity, then, “applying Hegel’s dialectic to history, insofar as he regarded it as part of the absolute self-consciousness of philosophy, does not do justice to hermeneutical consciousness.”⁷⁶ Experience for Gadamer is essentially experience of human finitude and uncertainty.⁷⁷ Experience cannot, therefore, culminate in the transcendence of this finitude, as this would entail moving beyond history and tradition. As above, however, this does not imply that tradition is absolute. Rather, genuine experience, as characterized by its essential openness to new experience, engenders a radically undogmatic perspective within history and tradition.

Gadamer asserts the primacy of prejudices for hermeneutical understanding in light of the historically effected consciousness. It is by virtue of the inherent reflective activity of this consciousness that prejudices are effective and productive :

⁷² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁷⁵ “Nous fondons la tâche herméneutique précisément sur la tension qui existe entre la ‘familiarité’ et le caractère ‘étranger’ du message que nous transmet la tradition. [...] Ce n’est pas un état psychique mais la ‘chose même’ livrée par la tradition qui est l’objet de l’interrogation herméneutique. En ce qui concerne le caractère à la fois ‘familier’ et ‘étranger’ des messages historiques, l’herméneutique réclame en quelque sorte une ‘position de médiateur’” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Le Problème de la Conscience Historique*, ed. Pierre Fruchon (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1996), p. 85-86).

⁷⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 349.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us.⁷⁸

As we saw, one of the more salient features of hermeneutics for Habermas is its capacity for “self-transcendence.” In this respect, Gadamer finds that he and Habermas share a similar view regarding the function of critical reflection. For both hermeneutics and the social sciences, the consciousness of effective history is able to counter the “naïve objectivism that falsifies not only the positivistic theory of science but also any project of laying either a phenomenological or language-analytical foundation for sociology.”⁷⁹

Gadamer, however, is skeptical of the implication he sees in Habermas’s criticism of tradition – namely, that prejudices are *only* ideological, and so, critical reflection functions *only* to overturn them. In his view, Habermas wants to utilize the concept of effective history as a way for the social sciences to reflect upon, and so emancipate themselves from, their linguistic foundations. By contrast, Gadamer argues that this reflective activity does not function outside of tradition. Rather, it justifies those prejudices that remain productive for the development of hermeneutical consciousness and undermines those that do not.⁸⁰ Consciousness of effective history thus performs its own double hermeneutic. It “determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation,”⁸¹ and at the same time “seeks to be aware of its prejudgments and to control its own preunderstanding.”⁸² In contrast to Habermas, Gadamer therefore claims that the consciousness of effective history has the ability both to validate

⁷⁸ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32-33.

⁸¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 300.

⁸² Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 27.

legitimate prejudices and to bring into relief elements of dogmatism or domination in tradition that otherwise obscure legitimate, historical knowledge. For Gadamer this consciousness *must* have this ability, as human experience cannot transcend its own essential historical finitude.

The historically effected consciousness therefore achieves the hermeneutical task by elevating tradition to the status of a transcendental subject.⁸³ “The true historical object,” Gadamer writes, “is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding.”⁸⁴ The horizons of the past and present thereby constitute “one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness.”⁸⁵ The historically effected consciousness takes neither a subjective nor an objective stance toward history and tradition. True historical knowledge, which the fusion of horizons achieves, reflects the fact that the horizons of the past and the present constitute a single, historical horizon that embraces them both.⁸⁶ The fusion of horizons thus involves “rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other,” such that acquiring a horizon means that “one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.”⁸⁷

⁸³ Jean Grondin writes, “La *Wirkungsgeschichte* décrit le travail (*Wirken*) de l’histoire en général qui prend la place du sujet dans la compréhension. L’histoire se trouve ainsi élevée au rang de sujet transcendantal qui rend possible la connaissance. On connaît les formules provocantes de Gadamer : ‘en vérité ce n’est pas l’histoire qui nous appartient, c’est nous qui lui appartenons’ (WM, 261) ; ‘le comprendre lui-même doit être considéré moins comme une action de la subjectivité que comme une insertion dans le procès de la transmission où se médiatisent constamment le passé et le présent’ (WM, 274)” (Jean Grondin, “La Conscience du travail de l’histoire et le problème de la vérité en herméneutique,” *Archives de Philosophie* 44, no. 3 (Juillet-Septembre 1981), p. 435-453, here p. 439).

⁸⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 299.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

The development of historical consciousness therefore necessitates that each horizon, by virtue of its finitude, be essentially open and subject to change via its fusion with another worldview. This fusion does not involve forgoing one's own horizon and transposing oneself into a past horizon, just as learning a new language does not mean abandoning one's own. Rather, the notion of a transposition between historical frameworks belongs to the naïve methodology of historical science, which objectifies the content of the past, thereby suspending the relevance of its truth-claim for the present situation of the historian.⁸⁸ This methodological approach furthermore undermines the ontological situation of the historian by divorcing them from their own historicity, and thus their self-understanding, which is grounded within tradition.

For Gadamer, then, the historically effected consciousness is intrinsically related to the linguistic presentation of a worldview. As such, the constant development of a language and worldview unfolds as effective history. Importantly, Gadamer indicates that consciousness of effective history implies an awareness of the internal, normative guidelines of the linguistic constitution of the world :

The consciousness that is effected by history has its fulfillment in what is linguistic. We can learn from the sensitive student of language that language, in its life and occurrence, must not be thought of as merely changing, but rather as something that has a teleology operating within it. This means that the words that are formed, the means of expression that appear in a language in order to say certain things, are not accidentally fixed, since they do not once again fall altogether into disuse. Instead, a definite articulation of the world is built up – a process that works as if guided and one that we can always observe in children who are learning to speak.⁸⁹

In contrast to Habermas's claim that "linguistic structures and the empirical conditions under which they change historically" remain

⁸⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 300, p. 302-303.

⁸⁹ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 13.

external to tradition,⁹⁰ Gadamer maintains that the formal criteria for the objectivity of aesthetic or historical consciousness are themselves historically mediated and therefore subject to revision. The historian, for example, who approaches history as a critical science is “so little separated from the ongoing traditions (for example, those of his nation) that he is really *himself engaged in* contributing to the growth and development of the national state.”⁹¹ The historian comes to understand himself just as much as the historical object. In this respect Gadamer states that the historically effected consciousness, which achieves self-understanding by bringing our prejudices to the fore, is “inevitably more *being* than consciousness.”⁹²

It is by virtue of its unique sensitivity to the evident or questionable nature of judgments and assertions that Gadamer claims that hermeneutical reflection is elevated to the status of a universal.⁹³ Habermas argues, however, that this ambiguity in language is susceptible to pseudocommunication. The psychoanalytic approach to a controlled interpretation is meant to reinforce generalized patterns that follow a causal relation between universal and particular in an ideal speech situation. On this approach it is possible to achieve an “unforced universal agreement,” which Habermas claims can avoid the possibility of pseudocommunication.⁹⁴ However, because it presupposes an ideal situation for communication, it is questionable if this agreement can actually be realized.⁹⁵ Hypostasizing an ideal form

⁹⁰ Habermas, *Logic*, p. 174.

⁹¹ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 28. For the same reason, Gadamer claims that Habermas overlooks the fact that his critique of language and tradition is itself an act of linguistic and historical reflection (*ibid.*, p. 30).

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 38 ; emphasis his.

⁹³ By contrast, insofar as psychoanalytic emancipation cannot account for cases where tradition is not ideological, it cannot claim the same status (Teigas, *Knowledge and Hermeneutic Understanding*, p. 131). Were it given this status, Gadamer argues, this form of reflection would entail the “dissolution of all authority” and establish an “anarchistic utopia” in the social sciences (Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 42).

⁹⁴ Habermas, “The Hermeneutical Claim to Universality,” p. 206.

⁹⁵ In several essays written after the publication of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer draws a parallel between the universality of hermeneutical reflection and the rhetorical essence of language. He writes, for example, that beginning with Plato and Aristotle, rhetoric “has been the only advocate

of speech within a clinical setting ignores the fact that outside their relationship the analyst and patient are part of a much larger social community, whose members all contribute individually to the development of social and political processes.⁹⁶

For this reason Gadamer claims that psychoanalytic emancipation is a specialized form of hermeneutic reflection that has its own specific boundaries.⁹⁷ The hermeneutical relation between whole and part, in contrast to a causal relation, is reciprocal. The whole changes in light of the meaning of its parts, and the parts in light of the whole. This relation is elaborated ontologically, and so operates prior to the empirical relation between general and particular that Habermas elevates to an ideal. Human understanding and human nature are both essentially historical and finite, and so, in becoming experienced, “man is ceaselessly forming a new preunderstanding,” which in turn is brought into question via hermeneutical reflection.⁹⁸ This activity, Gadamer argues, is an essential feature of understanding, and so applies just as much to the natural sciences as it does any other field

of a claim to truth that defends the probable, the *eikos* (verisimile), and that which is convincing to the ordinary reason, against the claim of science to accept as true only what can be demonstrated and tested!” (Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 24). It is this rhetorical function of language that Habermas argues can lead to pseudocommunication. As Grondin explains, true understanding for Habermas would be rhetoric-free, which is precisely why it is only possible in an ideal situation – i.e., without any possibility that meanings could be otherwise. As he puts it, “Mais c’est une autre façon de dire que cette vérité non rhétorique ne sera *jamais* atteinte, ce qui ne nous avance pas tellement” (Jean Grondin, “L’Universalité de l’herméneutique et de la rhétorique : ses sources dans le passage de Platon à Augustin dans ‘Vérité et méthode,’” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 54, n° 3 (Septembre 2000), p. 469-485, here p. 483-484 ; emphasis his).

⁹⁶ Warnke suggests that this approach also depends upon a prior distinction between normal and abnormal forms of communication and social behavior (Warnke, *Hermeneutics*, p. 127). This distinction is arguably the product of its own cultural bias, and so it is questionable how it might be universalized within any given cultural group without alienating or marginalizing some of its members.

⁹⁷ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 41-42.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

by enabling these sciences to bring their own presuppositions into question.⁹⁹

Conclusion

Gadamer's priority of the question, which is essential to the hermeneutical claim to universality, presupposes the openness that is essential to genuine, hermeneutical experience. In his defence of the ubiquity of hermeneutical reflection and the medium of language, Gadamer contends that ideology can be more appropriately understood "as a form of false linguistic consciousness," which can be made meaningful and intelligible as ideology through hermeneutical reflection.¹⁰⁰ As part of the presentation of a worldview, an ideological form of consciousness takes the form of a closed question. The idea or concept guiding this consciousness has been restricted dogmatically to a range of allowable meanings, and so its understanding of the things themselves is inauthentic.¹⁰¹ Emancipating the interpreter from this false consciousness also emancipates the idea, allowing it to once again assert its own meaning – that is, openly and authentically. The reflection that occurs as part of a dialogue thus functions as a mode of questioning that can see through and avoid forms of dogmatism that distort understanding.

Gadamer is careful to point out that the openness of a question is not a total openness. The significance of the question is that what it brings into question remains indeterminate. A key feature of this indeterminacy is, somewhat paradoxically, its limitation to the nature of the subject matter and the scope of possible answers.¹⁰² Without a limited horizon, the question remains empty (*leer*) rather than open (*offen*). Its sense remains *utterly* indeterminate and therefore receptive to any interpretation whatsoever. Elsewhere, Gadamer explains that a pre-condition for the articulation of meaning is that judgments must be made in light of the necessary structure of the things themselves, but that this structure becomes manifested through accidents. He

⁹⁹ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 356.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 357.

refers to Hegel's notion of "freedom for all" as the situation in which every rational agent can claim to interpret, and therefore to know, history. Each claim to historical knowledge is, by nature, accidental, as it reflects the individual perspective of each interpreter. These claims do not contradict the idea of a necessary, intelligible order, but instead highlight aspects of this necessity. History, Gadamer claims, is the freedom for all; it is an "irrefutable principle and yet still requires ever anew the effort toward achieving its realization."¹⁰³ To understand this point, he says, is to understand the "dialectical relationship of necessity and contingency."¹⁰⁴ The question of the meaning of being develops the same relationship. Properly asked, the question is neither closed (so that it coheres with predetermined answers), nor empty (so that it has no actual, substantive content). Rather, in an authentic dialogue the back-and-forth of question and answer has its scope determined by the structure of the subject matter in question, but this subject is presented by the dialogue itself—that is, by the contingent circumstances of the interlocutors.

Coming to a shared understanding thus requires a certain art of communication. The common subject matter of a dialogue frames the conversation between the interlocutors, but obviously they must communicate in a way that is mutually understandable. Gadamer suggests that there is a dialectic art that pertains to speaking and writing that aids thought and understanding by producing clarity in one's intended meaning.¹⁰⁵ An essential feature of language in an authentic dialogue is its "I-lessness."¹⁰⁶ The interlocutors subordinate themselves to their shared subject matter such that any response is elicited from the subject matter itself:

When one enters into dialogue with another person and then is carried along further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person, holding itself back or exposing itself, that is determinative. Rather, the law of the subject matter [*die Sache*] is at issue in the dialogue and

¹⁰³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 394-395.

¹⁰⁶ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 65.

elicits statement and counterstatement and in the end plays them into each other.¹⁰⁷

Within hermeneutics, then, the “art” of communication achieves a shared understanding as the “coming-into-language of the thing itself,” and so the shared understanding that is the product of the fusion of horizons and the historically effected consciousness is really this achievement of language.¹⁰⁸

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¹⁰⁷ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 371.

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